



Speech Acts and the Dynamic Nature of Contemporary Linguistic Interaction

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Abstract

This review article critically examines the evolution of speech act theory in response to the dynamic, context-sensitive, and socially distributed nature of contemporary linguistic interaction. While classical frameworks proposed by Austin and Searle established foundational taxonomies for understanding language as action, these models increasingly reveal limitations when confronted with the fluid, multimodal, and interactionally negotiated character of twenty-first-century communication. Synthesizing research from pragmatics, interactional sociolinguistics, and philosophical linguistics published over the past several decades, I advance three central arguments: first, that contemporary speech acts operate through distributed agency across multiple participants and interactional timescales; second, that felicity conditions must be reconceptualized as emergent, negotiable, and multiply realizable across modalities; and third, that power asymmetries in social interaction demand renewed attention to how speech acts reproduce or challenge social hierarchies. The Review concludes by proposing an integrative framework for analysing speech acts as dynamic, co-constructed performances and identifying critical directions for future research at the intersection of pragmatics and social Theory.

Introduction

The proposition that speaking constitutes action stands among the most transformative insights in twentieth-century language study. When J. L. Austin delivered his William James Lectures at Harvard in 1955, he could scarcely have anticipated that his nascent Theory of performative utterances would evolve into a cornerstone of linguistic pragmatics, philosophy of language, and sociolinguistic inquiry [1]. Austin's fundamental insight that to say something is often to do something, whether promising, warning, commanding, or apologizing, radically unsettled the prevailing logical positivist assumption that language's primary function lay in describing pre-existing states of affairs [2]. His student and successor, John Searle, systematized this intuition into a comprehensive taxonomy of illocutionary acts, establishing categories that have shaped decades of subsequent research: assertive,

directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations [3]. However, for all their intellectual power, these foundational frameworks emerged from a particular philosophical and social imaginary, one characterized by face-to-face interaction, relatively stable social roles, and what Hymes would later term the "ethnography of speaking" model of contextually bounded events [4].

The intervening decades have witnessed transformations that Austin and Searle could not have predicted. Contemporary linguistic interaction unfolds across a bewildering array of environments: ephemeral social media exchanges, persistent messaging threads, asynchronous comment sections, multimodal video conversations, and voice-activated assistants. These environments challenge classical speech act theory on multiple fronts simultaneously. The tidy distinction between illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect becomes blurred when

multiple participants interact over time [5]. The assumption of a single speaker encoding intentional meaning for a receptive hearer collapses in multi-party, multi-channel exchanges where audiences remain partially visible and constantly shifting [6]. The emphasis on conventionalised illocutionary force indicators, such as performative verbs like "I promise" or "I apologise," proves inadequate for contexts where speech acts are accomplished through indirection, silence, or strategic ambiguity [7].

Moreover, contemporary linguistic scholarship has moved decisively beyond the sentence-bound, speaker-centred model that characterized early speech-act research. Drawing on conversation analysis, interactional linguistics, and multimodal discourse studies, researchers increasingly conceptualise speech acts not as discrete tokens launched by autonomous speakers but as emergent accomplishments that arise within sequentially organised, jointly managed interactional sequences [8]. This shift carries profound implications for how we understand felicity conditions, sincerity conditions, and the very notion of speaker intention. As Goodwin notes, meaning-making in face-to-face interaction already operates through the orchestration of talk, gesture, gaze, and body orientation. These findings gain urgency as communicative environments multiply the semiotic resources available to participants [9].

The present Review undertakes a systematic examination of the contemporary fortunes of speech act theory. Rather than treating classical frameworks as static doctrines to be either defended or dismissed, I adopt a critical but generative stance: Austin and Searle posed essential questions about language as action, yet their answers require substantial revision in light of empirical research across diverse communicative settings. The following literature review traces the intellectual trajectory from classical speech act theory through subsequent critiques and modifications, identifying persistent tensions that contemporary research must address. Subsequent sections examine three domains in which classical frameworks prove especially strained: the problem of distributed agency in multi-party interaction, the reconceptualisation of felicity conditions for multimodal contexts, and the politics of speech acts in socially stratified environments. The conclusion synthesises these threads into an integrative framework for analysing contemporary speech acts as dynamic, co-constructed, and materially embedded performances.

Classical Foundations and Critical Trajectories

The intellectual genealogy of speech act theory begins with Wittgenstein's later philosophy, which, though not directly concerned with speech acts per se, established the crucial principle that meaning resides in language's use within forms of life rather than in reference to extra-linguistic

reality [10]. Austin's lectures advanced this insight by drawing a now-familiar distinction between constative utterances, those that describe or report, thereby admitting truth-evaluation and performative utterances, those that accomplish actions through their very issuance, such as betting, bequeathing, or christening [1]. His signal contribution lay in demonstrating that the constative-performative distinction ultimately collapses: all utterances perform actions, and truth conditions represent merely one dimension of linguistic evaluation alongside felicity conditions, which concern the appropriateness of circumstances, participants, and procedures. Thus arose the tripartite analysis of speech acts into locutionary (the utterance's propositional content), illocutionary (the act performed in uttering, such as warning or promising), and perlocutionary (the effects achieved by uttering, such as persuading or alarming) dimensions [2].

Searle's systematization, building on Austin's insights while departing from them at crucial junctures, established speech act theory as a research program of remarkable scope and influence [3]. His taxonomy of illocutionary acts rests on several constitutive rules: propositional content rules specifying what can be said; preparatory rules concerning participants' beliefs and circumstances; sincerity rules about expressed psychological states; and an essential rule linking utterance type to illocutionary point [11]. This framework generated productive empirical research across multiple domains, from cross-cultural pragmatics investigating how speech act realisation patterns vary across languages to developmental psychology exploring children's acquisition of pragmatic competence [12]. Searle's concept of indirect speech acts, utterances whose illocutionary force differs from their literal meaning, as when "Can you reach the salt?" functions as a request rather than a yes-no question, opened rich avenues for investigating how speakers negotiate meaning through implicature and contextual inference [13].

However, even as speech act theory consolidated its position within linguistics and philosophy, critiques emerged from multiple quarters. Grice's Theory of meaning and implicature, though not fundamentally incompatible with Searle's framework, shifted attention toward speaker intentions and audience recognition as the mechanisms through which illocutionary force gets communicated [14]. This intentionalist emphasis carried both promise and peril: it explained how speakers could perform illocutionary acts without conventional performative formulas, but it also raised difficult questions about whether speaker intentions remain accessible, stable, or even necessary for successful communication [15]. Derrida's deconstructive engagement with speech act theory, particularly in "Signature Event Context," challenged the classical assumption that

illocutionary force depends on the speaker's co-present, intentional presence, arguing instead for the essential iterability and citationality of all linguistic acts [16]. While Derrida's influence has been more pronounced in literary and cultural Theory than in empirical linguistics, his insistence that writing exemplifies rather than deviates from language's fundamental character has proven prescient in an age of pervasive textual mediation.

Feminist and postcolonial critiques mounted more directly political challenges to speech act theory's implicit assumptions. Langton and Hornsby argued that speech act theory provides resources for analysing hate speech and pornography as performative acts that subordinate and silence [17]. Their work demonstrated that illocutionary disablement, the systematic undermining of certain speakers' capacity to perform particular speech acts, operates as a mechanism of social power. Similarly, postcolonial pragmatics scholars documented how speech-act taxonomies derived from Western philosophical traditions inadequately capture the pragmatic repertoires of non-Western languages, in which silence, indirection, and relational face concerns may take precedence over propositional clarity [18]. These critiques did not reject speech act theory wholesale but rather insisted on its historicization and contextualization: what counts as a promise, a threat, or an apology is not culturally invariant but emerges from locally specific norms of sociality and personhood [19].

The most consequential empirical challenge to classical speech act theory arose from conversation analysis (CA), a tradition that emerged from the pioneering work of Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson [20]. While Austin and Searle focused on isolated utterances analysed through philosophical intuition, CA researchers insisted on examining naturally occurring talk-in-interaction as a sequentially organised, jointly accomplished activity. From this perspective, a speech act is never simply a speaker's individual achievement but a participant's contribution to an unfolding sequence that next speakers accept, reject, or modify through responsive turns [21]. Levinson's concept of "activity types" and "interactional axioms" demonstrated that illocutionary force is as much a matter of sequential position as of propositional content: the same utterance functions differently as a first pair part versus a second pair part, as an initiating action versus a response [22]. This insight has profound implications: felicity conditions cannot be specified abstractly but must be understood as resources that participants deploy in real-time to monitor, repair, and sanction one another's contributions.

Subsequent research in interactional linguistics extended these insights by examining how multimodal resources,

such as gesture, gaze, posture, prosody, and embodied action, participate in the performance of speech acts [23]. Streeck's studies of gesture and speech act realisation demonstrated that illocutionary force distribution across modalities is not merely supplementary but constitutive: a pointing gesture may accomplish a directive that verbal resources alone could not adequately execute [24]. Goodwin's analysis of aphasic speakers' compensatory strategies revealed how participants collaboratively achieve speech acts even when one participant's linguistic capacities are severely compromised, suggesting that classical models overemphasise individual competence while neglecting distributed, multimodal accomplishment [9]. These findings align with Enfield's proposal for a "radical pragmatics" that treats speech acts as observable social actions rather than theoretical constructs accessed through intuition or introspection [25].

The literature review reveals persistent tensions that contemporary speech act theory must address. First, there is the tension between intentionalist and interactional approaches: can speech acts be adequately theorised without recourse to speaker intentions, or does the concept of illocutionary force require some notion of intended uptake? Second, the tension between universalist and particularist perspectives: does speech act theory seek universal taxonomies applicable across languages and contexts, or does it embrace radical contextual specificity? Third, and most pressingly for the present Review, the tension between stable and dynamic models: should speech acts be understood as discrete, bounded events with determinable conditions and effects, or as fluid, emergent accomplishments whose properties shift across timescales and participation frameworks? I argue that contemporary communication, characterised by multimodal resources, distributed participation, and technologically mediated environments, renders the dynamic perspective not merely preferable but necessary. The following sections develop this argument across three domains of contemporary concern.

Distributed Agency and the Problem of Collective Speech Acts

Perhaps the most fundamental challenge to classical speech act theory arises from the recognition that many communicative acts involve not a single speaker but multiple participants whose contributions are distributed across time and space. Austin's framework implicitly privileged a dyadic model: a speaker performs an act, and a hearer recognises that act, perhaps producing perlocutionary effects [1]. Searle's analysis of illocutionary acts similarly centred on the individual speaker's intentions and the conventional rules governing their expression [3].

Yet much of what we do with words in everyday life involves collective action, joint promises, shared assertions, and distributed directives that elude this individualist framing [26]. When a couple says "We promise to love and honour each other" in a wedding ceremony, which individual performs the commissive act? When a committee issues a report asserting certain findings, how do we attribute responsibility for the speech act? These questions have occupied philosophers of collective intentionality, who argue that some speech acts are irreducibly plural: they are performed by a "we" that cannot be reduced to a sum of individual "I" s [27].

Contemporary interactional research has documented how participants in ordinary conversation accomplish distributed speech acts through practices of collaborative turn construction, joint utterance completion, and synchronised multiple-speaker interaction [28]. Lerner's analysis of "collaborative turn sequences" shows how one speaker may initiate a syntactic structure that another completes, resulting in a single speech act produced by multiple participants [29]. Such phenomena challenge any simple equation of illocutionary force with individual intention: the completed speech act carries force that neither participant alone fully controlled, yet both are accountable for the outcome. In legal and institutional settings, distributed agency raises even more complex questions. A jury's verdict, a legislature's declaration, a board's resolution, these are speech acts performed by collectives according to decision procedures that may include voting, deliberation, and formal recording [30]. Classical speech act theory, with its focus on the individual speaker's psychological states, offers insufficient resources for analysing such collective performatives.

The problem extends beyond explicitly collective contexts to ordinary interactions, where agency is distributed among participants in subtler ways. Conversation analysts have documented how speakers design utterances to invite or require co-participant completion, how hearers may "steal" the turn to redirect an unfolding speech act, and how silence can function as a participant's contribution to a speech act's felicity or infelicity [31]. In these phenomena, the classical assumption of a single intending speaker dissolves into a more fluid picture of distributed, emergent agency. As Enfield argues, human social interaction is fundamentally characterised by "enchrony", the step-by-step, turn-by-turn co-construction of action in real time [25]. From this perspective, even a simple assertion is never merely an individual's act but a move in an ongoing sequence whose meaning and force depend on how recipients respond, align, or resist.

Addressing distributed agency in contemporary communication requires reconceptualising the speech act's subject from singular speaker to interactive system. I do not mean to eliminate the concept of individual responsibility or intentionality; rather, I suggest that classical frameworks overstate the autonomy and sovereignty of the individual speaker while understating the degree to which speech acts are collaboratively accomplished. This insight has practical consequences for how we analyse phenomena such as joint commitment, shared responsibility for perlocutionary effects, and the ethics of speech in multi-party settings [32]. Future research would profit from developing analytic frameworks that distribute illocutionary responsibility across participants while maintaining critical attention to how power and accountability track across such distributions.

Reimagining Felicity Conditions for Multimodal Contexts

Classical speech act theory's apparatus of felicity conditions propositional content, preparatory conditions, sincerity conditions, and essential conditions was developed primarily with spoken, face-to-face, institutionally situated interaction in mind [3]. Austin's canonical examples include acts of marrying, baptizing, and bequeathing whose felicity depends on participants holding appropriate institutional roles, following conventional procedures, and harbouring requisite intentions [1]. When communication shifts to contexts in which institutional roles are ambiguous, conventional procedures are emergent rather than codified, and intentions are inferable only from fragmented traces, the applicability of this apparatus becomes questionable [33]. Contemporary research has responded by reimagining felicity conditions not as abstract preconditions that speech acts must satisfy but as interactional resources that participants invoke, contest, and negotiate in real time.

One productive line of inquiry examines how communicative environments generate context-specific felicity conditions through sedimented practices and participant expectations. In a classroom, for example, the teacher's utterance "Open your books to page ten" functions as a directive with high deontic authority; the same utterance from a student to the teacher would likely be heard as inappropriate or humorous [34]. These felicity conditions are not universal but emerge from the institutional history and participant roles that structure the setting. Similarly, in online discussion forums, participants develop norms about what counts as a relevant contribution, a legitimate challenge, or a violation of epistemic propriety [35]. These norms function as felicity conditions, even when they are not codified in any formal rule system.

Multimodal communication further complicates felicity conditions by distributing illocutionary force across semiotic modes [23]. A directive to "come here" may be accomplished not only through verbal command but through a beckoning gesture, a gaze shift toward the desired location, a prosodic contour of urgency, or any combination thereof. Each modality carries its own felicity conditions and interpretive norms. Research on gesture has shown that pointing gestures, for instance, achieve referential success only when the recipient's gaze aligns with the pointing trajectory, a preparatory condition that does not apply to verbal reference [24]. Similarly, facial expressions function as illocutionary force modifiers: a smile can transform a criticism into a tease, just as a frown can render a compliment ambiguous. These multimodal resources are not mere supplements to verbal speech acts but integral to their accomplishment. As Kress has argued, meaning-making in contemporary communication is fundamentally multimodal, and any theory that privileges linguistic form alone will miss how participants actually coordinate action [36].

Interactional research has documented how participants accomplish speech acts through multimodal bundling, the coordination of multiple semiotic resources to produce a single recognisable action. A rejection may be packaged as an averted gaze, a brief pause, a minimal response token, and a subsequent shift in topic. Each modality contributes to the overall illocutionary force, yet no single modality is necessary or sufficient for recognition [37]. This finding challenges Searle's assumption of an essential condition, a constitutive rule linking utterance type to illocutionary point that can be specified independently of context. In multimodal, socially situated environments, there may be no context-independent essential condition for, say, a request; rather, participants orient to clusters of features whose relevance emerges interactionally. This does not mean that anything goes or that mutual understanding is impossible, but it does suggest that felicity conditions are best understood as dynamic achievements rather than static preconditions.

The temporal dynamics of contemporary communication further strain classical felicity conditions. Asynchronous exchanges introduce delays between utterance and uptake that may span seconds, hours, or days, during which participant configurations, relevant contextual knowledge, and even the utterance's availability may change. A speech act performed in a messaging thread may receive response only after intervening messages have shifted the interactional footing [38]. Under such conditions, the classical assumption that illocutionary force is determined at the moment of utterance and subsequently recognized or failed becomes untenable. Instead, interactional researchers

have documented practices of retrospective reinterpretation and projective, forward-looking design that distribute speech-act determination across temporal windows. A participant may post a message that is initially interpreted as an assertion but, after subsequent messages reveal ironic intent, is later reinterpreted as expressive all along. The question of which interpretation constitutes the "real" speech act is less interesting than the interactional work participants do to manage such ambiguities.

These insights suggest a reconceptualization of felicity conditions as emergent, negotiable, and multiply realisable. Rather than asking whether an utterance satisfies pre-existing conditions, we might ask how participants invoke, challenge, and repair felicity conditions through their interactional conduct. This shift from a verificationist to a performative model of felicity conditions aligns with broader developments in pragmatics that emphasise situated meaning-making over abstract semantic analysis. It also opens empirical research questions that classical frameworks obscure: Under what conditions do participants treat an utterance as having failed its felicity conditions? What repair strategies do they employ when felicity is questioned? How do environmental affordances constrain or enable the negotiation of felicity? Answering such questions requires methodologies that capture real-time interactional processes rather than relying on elicited judgments or textual analysis divorced from sequential context.

Power, Ideology, and Speech Acts in Social Interaction

Classical speech act theory has often been critiqued for its neglect of power asymmetries, a neglect that appears particularly consequential in socially stratified environments where participants occupy unequal positions of authority, status, and epistemic credibility [17]. Austin's analysis of perlocutionary effects recognised that speech acts can produce consequences beyond the speaker's control. However, his framework offered limited resources for analysing systemic inequalities in who can perform which speech acts and with what effects [1]. Feminist and critical race scholars have extended speech act theory to analyse hate speech, silencing, and testimonial injustice, showing how illocutionary disablement, the systematic undermining of marginalised speakers' capacity to perform certain speech acts, operates as a mechanism of social power [39].

Consider the phenomenon of silencing. When a woman reports sexual harassment, her utterance may fail to achieve its illocutionary point as a complaint or accusation, not because of any defect in propositional content or sincerity, but because hearers systematically disbelieve or dismiss such reports from women [17]. The speech act is performed,

but its perlocutionary effects, uptake, acknowledgement, and remedial action are withheld. This is not a failure of felicity conditions in Searle's sense but a social failure rooted in power relations. Similarly, testimonial injustice occurs when a speaker's assertion is accorded less credibility than it deserves due to identity prejudice [40]. The speaker performs the illocutionary act of asserting, but the perlocutionary effect of belief does not follow, and the speaker's epistemic authority is undermined. These phenomena are not marginal exceptions to normal communication but systematic features of socially stratified interaction.

Conversation analysts have documented how power asymmetries manifest in turn-taking, topic control, and repair practices. Higher-status participants interrupt more frequently, hold the floor longer, and initiate repair on lower-status participants' contributions [20]. These interactional patterns have illocutionary consequences: a lower-status speaker's directive may be treated as a request or a suggestion, while a higher-status speaker's suggestion may be treated as a directive. The same propositional content thus carries different illocutionary force depending on who utters it. Bourdieu's concept of "legitimate language" captures this insight: some speakers possess linguistic authority by virtue of their social position, enabling them to perform speech acts that others cannot [41]. A police officer's "Stop!" carries illocutionary force backed by state sanction; a civilian's "Stop!" addressed to a police officer carries no such force.

Cultural variation further complicates the picture. In many non-Western societies, direct directives may be considered rude or coercive regardless of the speaker's authority. In contrast, indirect requests, conveyed through hints or statements of need, may be preferred [18]. These cultural norms are not merely surface variations but reflect different underlying assumptions about face, hierarchy, and sociality. A speaker who performs a direct directive in such a context may be judged not as powerful but as boorish, thereby failing to achieve the intended perlocutionary effect. Classical speech act theory's emphasis on universal taxonomies obscures these culturally specific felicity conditions and the power dynamics they encode.

Critical pragmatics scholars have called for an expanded theory of speech acts that takes the material conditions of communicative possibility seriously. On this view, analysing a speech act requires not merely describing its propositional content and illocutionary force but examining the social arrangements that enable or constrain its performance. Who has access to which audiences? Whose speech carries institutional authority? Whose complaints trigger an investigation? Whose assertions are automatically

believed? These questions shift analytic attention from the speech act as an event toward the social ecologies within which speech acts become possible, visible, and consequential. Such an ecologically oriented speech act theory would treat felicity conditions as partly determined by social hierarchies, institutional arrangements, and cultural norms, conditions that participants may influence only minimally and that operate systematically to the benefit of already powerful actors.

Conclusion

This Review has traced the trajectory of speech act theory from its classical formulations through subsequent critiques and modifications to its contemporary applications in multimodal, interactionally distributed, and socially stratified environments. The argument has proceeded along three interconnected axes. First, I have shown that the assumption of singular, intentional, autonomous speaker-agency no longer captures the distributed nature of communicative action across multiple participants and temporal scales. Contemporary speech acts emerge from joint accomplishments where participants co-construct utterances, respond to prior turns, and hold one another accountable for emergent meanings. This does not render the concept of illocutionary force obsolete, but it does demand that we abandon any simple equation of speech acts with individual intentions. Instead, we must develop frameworks that track how agency, accountability, and interpretive authority are distributed among participants, attending carefully to how such distributions reproduce or contest existing power relations.

Second, I have argued that classical felicity conditions require reconceptualisation as emergent, negotiable, and multiply realisable across modalities and temporal scales. Multimodal communication distributes illocutionary force across verbal, visual, gestural, and embodied resources in ways that defy any single-modality essential condition. The temporal dynamics of asynchronous communication further complicate speech act analysis, as participants engage in retrospective re-interpretation and projective forward-looking design across extended temporal windows. These findings suggest that speech act theory would benefit from adopting interactional and sequential methodologies that capture how participants themselves invoke, contest, and repair felicity conditions through their conduct, rather than treating felicity as an abstract property that utterances either possess or lack.

Third, I have examined the politics of speech acts in socially stratified environments, showing how power asymmetries, cultural norms, and institutional arrangements create systematic inequalities in who can perform which speech acts with what effects. Marginalised speakers face

illocutionary disablement and testimonial injustice, while powerful speakers enjoy heightened credibility and illocutionary authority. Addressing these asymmetries requires expanding speech act theory to encompass the social ecologies that enable or constrain communicative possibility, and an ecologically oriented pragmatics that treats social hierarchies, institutional arrangements, and cultural norms as partly constitutive of felicity conditions.

Looking forward, speech act research must embrace methodological pluralism, combining fine-grained interactional analysis of situated exchanges with broader sociological analysis of power and inequality. The integration of conversation analysis with critical discourse analysis represents a productive frontier. Equally important is the extension of speech act research beyond Western, educated, industrialised contexts. The frameworks developed in this Review, despite claims to universality, reflect particular intellectual traditions and communicative ecologies. Cross-cultural and comparative research will reveal which aspects of speech act performance vary across contexts and which, if any, exhibit genuine invariance. Ultimately, speech act theory's continued vitality depends on its capacity to evolve alongside communicative practice itself. The forms of linguistic interaction that will characterise the coming decades cannot be predicted with confidence. It can be predicted that language will continue to be used for practical purposes. Understanding how it works will require theoretical resources as dynamic and adaptive as the practices they seek to explain.

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